

BLUE LAKES WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 20,508 acres

The Blue Lakes WSA (NV-020-600) is located in northwest Nevada in Humboldt County. The WSA includes 20,508 acres of public lands and surrounds 40 acres of private land.

The boundary of the study area incorporates the highest portions of the Pine Forest Mountain Range and skirts the most heavily used recreation sites in the area. It uses the Theodore Basin-New York Peak Road for its western and northern boundary, the Theodore Basin-Big Creek Road for its eastern boundary and section lines, to keep the WSA apart from private lands, for the remainder of the boundary.,

The Blue Lakes WSA has subalpine and sagebrush steppe ecosystems and extensive riparian zones. Blue Lakes were formed by a moraine-dammed stream, made after a mountain glacier melted and left a large depression (a cirque) which was then filled by springs from the surrounding hillside. This type of geologic formation is very rare in the Great Basin and especially in northwestern Nevada. Other evidences of glaciation, such as polished rock, moraines, glacial canyons and striation, are also present in the area.

The topography is generally steep with slopes averaging 60 percent. The backbone of the Pine Forest Range is a north-south trending line. Valleys originate near the range summit and vary from broad meadows to steep draws. Blue Lakes, a heavily used fishery, is stocked by the Nevada Department of Wildlife since there are not enough nutrients to support a large, viable population. There is a disjunct population (i.e., separated from the main populations, which can lead to genetic variation) of limber and whitebark pine trees in portions of the higher elevations.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The recommendation for this WSA is to designate 16,400 acres as wilderness and to release 4,108 acres for uses other than wilderness.

The recommended area includes (1) a substantially natural area with minimal range improvements and abandoned ways, (2) outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation, including day hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting, fishing, horse packing, rock climbing, nature study and water sports; (3) outstanding opportunities for solitude provided by excellent topographic and vegetative screening and the area's size and configuration, (4) significant features including subalpine glacial lakes, granitic rock outcrops, an isolated population of whitebark and limber pines, diverse wildlife species, extensive riparian zones and (5) a highly scenic landscape. The majority of the recommended area was designated in 1977 as closed to vehicles by the BLM and a portion (2,900 acres) has been withdrawn from mineral entry. Wilderness designation would provide more comprehensive management guidance for protecting the area's natural values than do these designations.

Those portions that are recommended for nonwilderness are on the periphery of the WSA. They were deleted to create a more identifiable boundary and to reduce conflicts with mining claims and private lands. One area is accessible to OHVS and is adjacent to a mining area which detracts greatly from naturalness. The other area is adjacent to large blocks of private land.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Blue Lakes WSA is predominantly natural. It lies in a mountainous north-south trending range (the Pine Forest Range) with subalpine and sagebrush steppe ecosystems and extensive riparian zones.

Blue Lakes were formed by a moraine-dammed stream, made after a mountain glacier melted and left a large depression (a cirque) which was then filled by springs from the surrounding hillside. Other evidences of glaciation, such as polished rock, moraines, glacial canyons and striation, are also present in the area.

Most of the WSA's interior contains few developments except for range improvements such as fences or developed springs. The periphery of the WSA has six vehicle ways (closed to vehicle traffic since 1977) totaling 10.8 miles and one line shack. Outside sights and sounds are primarily restricted to light vehicular traffic (especially recreational traffic around Onion Valley and Little Onion Reservoirs) and a mine adjacent to the boundary in the north. The recommended area has 9.6 miles of ways (unused), a portable solar radio repeater used by the BLM in the management of the area and several range improvements. The overall influence of human imprints, as perceived by the visitor, is negligible.

B. Solitude: This WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. The rugged topography and dense vegetation provide excellent screening for visitors. A few open areas on the periphery of the WSA are less conducive to solitude, particularly in portions that are not recommended for wilderness.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Blue Lakes WSA provides some of the best primitive recreation opportunities in northwest Nevada. The study area has excellent opportunities for day hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting, fishing, horse packing, rock climbing and nature study. The variety of terrain, highly scenic landforms and vegetation and numerous attractions all enhance the primitive recreational opportunities. In addition, the lack of similar landscapes in the region makes the WSA particularly attractive to recreationists. Abundant wildlife is present, including trophy mule deer, antelope, mountain lion, sage grouse, chukar and bighorn sheep.

D. Special Features: The most outstanding features are the clear, cold subalpine lakes themselves, nestled in a cirque, fed by snowmelt and abundant springs. Glacial lakes are a rarity in northern Nevada. They are separated from each other by narrow moraines that were formed when the ancient glacier halted for a time.

The lakes are surrounded by a combination of whitebark and limber pines, a population that became isolated when the surrounding lands became drier and were unable to support the species. By being separated from the main population, genetic variations can occur.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The portion of the WSA recommended for wilderness designation can reasonably be managed as wilderness to preserve values now present in the area. There are no private inholdings or split estate lands; nor are there any oil or gas or geothermal leases. There are 380 acres of mining claims located at the extreme southern tip and it is considered unlikely that these claims would be developed to an extent detrimental to wilderness values. The area is presently being managed as an ORV closure.

The portion of the WSA recommended for nonwilderness can also be reasonably managed as wilderness but there would be manageability concerns. These include the 460 acres of mining claims and the 40 acres of inholdings.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

Quantities of various minerals are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is moderate in approximately one-third of the WSA. There is no potential for oil and gas and geothermal resources.

The U.S. Geological Survey Mineral Report states that although mineral resources were identified within the recommended portion of the WSA, there is low potential for undiscovered gold and silver resources and

associated minerals (antimony, copper, lead, mercury, molybdenum, zinc and uranium) throughout the study area. A low potential exists for undiscovered tungsten in three small areas in the northern portion of the WSA.

There are 840 acres of mining claims and no leases in the WSA.

In summary, quantities of various minerals are unknown, but the potential for occurrence is moderate in approximately one-third of the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During the initial and intensive inventory stages (1978-1980), many of the 19 comments discussed characteristics of the area (e.g., intrusions, resources, wilderness qualities) or suggested boundary changes. Reasons given for supporting wilderness study area status were these: opportunities for solitude, spectacular scenery, the naturalness and special features. Reasons given for opposing wilderness study area status were the following: other resource values, roads, intrusions, and lack of outstanding opportunities for solitude. These comments addressed the entire 51,200 acres of the original study area. About 30,000 acres have since been released from wilderness consideration.

During the 90-day comment period for the Draft Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement, three formal public meetings were held in Nevada (Gerlach on November 1, Winnemucca on November 3 and Reno on November 8, 1983). Nine oral comments were received as well as 67 written comments. Eight of the oral comments supported the Proposed Action (16,400 acres designated as wilderness) and one person supported less wilderness than that proposed in the draft EIS. Of the 67 written comments, 61 people supported the proposed action, while one person wanted more wilderness and five people wanted less than that proposed in the draft EIS.

Most of the comments were about the unique glacial lake scenery, the need to protect the fragile ecosystem and the aspen and pine stands and the opportunities for recreation. Other people suggested a smaller area because of potential mineral resources and asserted that the WSA has a lot of human imprints, lacks opportunities for solitude and that access for hunters is needed.

No comments about wilderness were received from Humboldt County agencies or officials during this time period. However, the county's land use plan addresses wilderness designation specifically under Goal 5: "To prevent commonly used areas of Humboldt County from being erroneously designated as "wilderness" or roadless areas. In addition, Goal 6 states, "To maintain the existing roads and access necessary to the economic well being of Humboldt County including the agriculture, livestock, mining and tourist industries as well as to maintain the quality of life in Humboldt County by ensuring access to recreational lands of all kinds including fishing, wildlife, rock-hounding, sight-seeing, off road vehicle use, horseback and back packing use and general enjoyment of the (sic) Nevada's traditional wide open spaces".

Because the terms "commonly used areas" and "erroneously designated as wilderness" are not defined, it is difficult to determine whether wilderness designation is consistent or inconsistent with Goal 5. Wilderness designation could be both consistent and inconsistent with Goal 6 since wilderness designation would ensure public access for most recreational activities mentioned but close areas to off-road vehicle use.

The Governor of the State of Nevada said. "We note that the county has now accepted the road closure as being necessary to protect the fragile alpine lake environment, and is not opposed to wilderness designation for the area." He concurred with the Bureau's recommendation. The U.S. Air Force supports wilderness designation provided no restrictions were placed on military flights. It said it would work with the BLM if military flights create problems in some areas. No comments were received on the final EIS.